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ABSTRACT

Between 1969 and 1984, the number of adults participating in educational programs increased 79 percent and the number of adult education activities doubled. The following facts should be considered when developing instructional programs for adult learners: individuals can learn throughout their lives, adult life cycles influence learning, adults learn what they consider important, adults are often time-conscious learners, what is important varies among adults, adults generally (but not always) wish to be treated as such, and biological changes may affect learning. Creating a learning environment that meets the needs of adult learners is a key element of successful adult education programs. Some strategies for accomplishing this are as follows: establish adult-to-adult rapport, create a participatory environment, facilitate adult independence, and provide for individual differences. Although many adult learning activities do not require formal evaluation procedures, adult learners need to learn how to identify and evaluate their own resources, abilities, and knowledge realistically. When formal evaluation is required, adult students are best evaluated by using a collaborative approach. Recommended collaborative approaches include group decision making, learning contracts, and grading contracts. (MN)

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GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH ADULT LEARNERS

ERIC DIGEST NO. 77

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH ADULT LEARNERS

Between 1969 and 1984, the number of adults participating in educational programs increased 79 percent, and the number of activities doubled (Hill 1987). The growth of adult education is being stimulated by a number of broad demographic, economic, and societal trends including the following:

- The increased realization that adults continue to change and grow throughout their lives and frequently seek assistance in dealing with these changes
- The greater proportion of adults in the total population due to increased longevity and declining birthrates
- The higher demand for occupational and professional training due to the presence of the baby boom generation in the work force
- The growing need for job retraining caused by economic and technological changes that have eliminated some jobs and revised the nature of many others

This **ERIC Digest,** a revision of Fact Sheet No. 25 (Imel [1982]), provides guidelines to consider when developing educational programs for adults in any setting. It focuses on the characteristics of adults that affect learning, describing how to develop a climate that is conducive to adult learning as well as identifying appropriate evaluation strategies. Brief reviews of some recent resources conclude the **Digest.**

Characteristics of Adult Learners

Adults possess characteristics that influence how they learn and that should be considered when developing instructional programs. Although it is important to realize that each adult is an individual, some generalizations can be applied to adult learners. Through a review of the literature on adult learners, Kalamas (1987) identified the following:

- **Individuals Can Learn throughout Their Lives.** Unfortunately, adults are frequently their own worst enemies when it comes to doubting their ability to learn new things. Older adults, particularly, may need encouragement to engage in learning activities . One advantage adults have over youth in their ability to learn is a broad range of experience. These experiences enhance their ability to perceive, process, and use information and provide a foundation for gaining additional knowledge.
- **Adult Life Cycles Influence Learning.** Every adult progresses through a series of life phases. In each phase of life, certain behaviors and skills—known as developmental tasks—need to be learned. Life-cycle phases influence how individuals approach learning as well as what they want or need to learn. Designers of instructional programs should consider the developmental needs of adult learners at specific developmental stages. (See Naylor [1985] for more information about adult development.)
- **Adults Learn What They Consider Important.** Adult learning is usually motivated by the need to acquire a new skill or make a decision. When adults perceive a need to learn something, they are generally capable of working very hard. Since most adult learning is voluntary, adults also have the prerogative of dropping out of programs that do not meet their needs.
- **Adults Are Often Time-Conscious Learners.** Adults have many roles (e.g., spouse, parent, employee, community member) in addition to that of learner. Therefore, most want to meet their educational goals as directly, quickly, and efficiently as possible.
- **What Is Important Varies among Adults.** Adults engage in educational programs for a variety of reasons. Most—75 percent—enroll for job-related reasons, but others take nonoccupational courses for personal or social reasons (Hill 1987). Because adults know what goals are important to them, they tend to do best in educational experiences that provide what they value.
- **Adults Wish to Be Treated as Such—Sometimes.** By adulthood, individuals have developed an independent view of self, and most adults want to be treated as if they were responsible individuals with the capacity to determine things for themselves. Adult learning situations should be designed to allow adults to retain as much autonomy as possible. Because some adults have experienced only structured and teacher-centered learning environments, they may need assistance in accepting responsibility for their own learning.
- **Biological Changes May Affect Learning.** Although adults can continue to learn throughout their lives, physical changes may need to be considered when planning and conducting educational activities. Biological changes such as speed and reaction time, visual and auditory acuity, and intellectual functioning may all affect learning.

Creating a Climate for Adult Learning

Creating a learning environment that meets the needs of adult learners is a key element of successful adult education programs. The challenge is to create a nonthreatening atmosphere in which adults have permission and are expected to share in the responsibility for their learning. Following are some strategies for accomplishing this:

- **Establish Adult-to-Adult Rapport.** To build rapport with adults in the learning environment, use positive nonverbal communication, deal with the whole person, address learners as equals, share authority, and employ informal room arrangements such as placing all the chairs in a circle, in a U, or around a table. Adult students also appreciate instructors who share appropriate information about themselves and who are approachable and accessible.
- **Create a Participatory Environment.** A participatory environment, which helps learners assume responsibility for their own learning, can be created by involving the learners in deciding on course content and establishing class management guidelines, having learners serve as instructional resources, and monitoring learner satisfaction throughout the activity. Providing multiple learning options, which enables learners to choose those methods

and materials best suited to their needs, will also encourage participation.

- **Facilitate Adult Independence.** Instructors can help adults assume more responsibility for their own learning by encouraging them to learn on their own, serving as a role model of an independent adult learner, and teaching decision-making and problem-solving techniques.
- **Provide for Individual Differences.** Because they have an independent self-concept, adults view themselves as individuals, and it is important to acknowledge adults as individuals in the educational setting. Individual differences can be accommodated by using a variety of instructional techniques, providing appropriate and varied instructional materials, relating instruction to learners' experience, and adjusting for physiological and psychological differences.

Evaluating Adult Learning

Although many adult learning activities do not require formal evaluation procedures, adult learners need to learn how to identify and evaluate their own resources, abilities, and knowledge realistically. When formal evaluation is required, "[e]valuation strategies for adults are most effective when traditional authority roles are de-emphasized, and the learner's role as an autonomous, responsible adult is emphasized" (Kopp 1987, p. 50). Adults should be involved not only in determining what they learn but also in identifying and establishing their own evaluation techniques.

Kopp suggests the following three collaborative approaches that can be used in establishing a basis for evaluation.

1. **Group decision making** in which class members participate jointly in identifying and selecting evaluation strategies to be used
2. **Learning contracts** that help learners clarify their objectives, document their learning and evaluation plans, and commit themselves to the work they have contracted to do
3. **Grading contracts** that provide learners with options in the relative weight of evaluation activities and in the amount of work they will perform

Resources on Adult Learning

A number of recent publications can be used in designing programs for adult learners. In addition to those listed in the References, the following books will serve as helpful resources for those seeking more information on this aspect of adult education.

- **Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn** (Wlodkowski 1985) presents 68 motivational strategies designed to increase adult learning in a wide variety of settings. Also described are the characteristics and skills of a motivating instructor.
- **Helping Adults Learn** (Knox 1986) is a comprehensive guide to all aspects of planning, implementing, and evaluating programs for adult learners. The book includes practical "how-to" advice that is supported by examples from practice as well as checklists and guidelines to be used in program development.
- **Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning** (Brookfield 1986) critically examines and analyzes current approaches to adult learning, presents a comprehensive review of how adults learn, and proposes ways to develop more creative, up-to-date adult education programs. Brookfield explores what he calls the "theory-practice disjunctions" between theories-in-use and espoused theories.

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This ERIC Digest is based on the following

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[Note: There are six modules in this series. Refer to ERIC Document Reproduction Service Nos. ED 289 964 through 969.]

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Kopp, K. "Evaluate the Performance of Adults." Module N-6 of Category N. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 289 969).

"Manage the Adult Instructional Process." Module N-5 of Category N. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 289 968).

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